

# A TALE of RED ROSES

By  
**GEORGE RANDOLPH CHESTER**

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CHAPTER III.

## An Engagement Without a Kiss.

BERT, annoyed by the events of the evening, but relieved to some extent by Molly's inexpressible and delightful change of manner toward him in the pleasant half hour before the party had dispersed, took his thoughtful place in Sledge's machine and prepared for the usual welcome silence, which those who knew him had a right to expect from the reticent boss. To his surprise, however, Sledge talked.

"Great party Molly had," observed the donor of the fireworks and the music and the passes and the red roses.

"A feverish success," agreed Bert. "Molly is inclined to give you all the credit for it."

"She can have anything she wants," stated Sledge. "I'm going to marry her."

"Did she say so?" inquired Bert. "Not yet," acknowledged Sledge. "She's thinking it over."

"Oh," returned Bert, much relieved and smiling in the darkness. He complacently twirled his mustache. He had a good one on Molly.

"What time am I to see you in the morning about that Porson property?" he inquired, determined not further to discuss the lady.

"Eleven o'clock."

Bert went into the house, half amused and wholly vexed. It might be very funny to see this blundering big boor making a fool of himself, but the joke was entirely ruined by the fact that at the same time he was making a fool of everybody else.

Bert knew, to the shore, how much street railway and Gas and Electric stock Marley held. The growing city needed vastly increased transportation facilities, and with the increase of these would come an increase of Marley wealth and influence. It might be a very handy thing for a young real estate dealer to have the president of a rapidly expanding street railway company for a father-in-law. He went to sleep, dreaming pleasantly of extensions and subdivisions and advance information on factory sites—and of Molly, of course.

He awoke determined to concretize these dreams or to dismiss them and find others. Molly had either to accept him or definitely to turn him loose after what other fish there might be in the sea. The possibility of having Sledge for a rival was too much to endure.

He went to his office, dividing this train of thought with his plans for the marketing of the Porson tract, hurried to the First National to secure a loan of ten thousand on the new property and arranged at the German bank for an extension of certain other loans which would have to be deferred if he used his ten thousand available funds to complete the cash purchase which Bendis demanded. These more urgent matters disposed of, he called up Molly.

"May I come out?" he demanded. "When?" drawled a languid voice. "Right away."

"No," she drawled again. "But, Molly, I must see you," he seriously insisted. "It's important."

"It always is," she laughed. "What's it about this time?"

"Oh, the same old thing," he acknowledged, "only more so."

"You're crowding them closer together," chided Molly. "Moreover, this is the first time by telephone, I think."

"I didn't mean it to be so," he apologized. "You've trapped me into it and taken away any chance I might have of persuasiveness. Now I suppose it will be the same old answer."

"Not necessarily," she was astounding reply, in the same sleepy drawl. "What?" he gasped. "Say that again."

"Not necessarily," she repeated, and he caught the sound of a repressed giggle.

"You're teasing me," he protested. "You don't mean that I'm to have the right answer this time."

"It depends on what you mean by the right answer."

"The one I've always wanted."

The governor's ball being considered by common consent the first social gun of the season, after which lesser social lights might presume to shine with authorization, everybody who was anybody made it a point to be there and compare artillery. They made it a special point this year since Governor Waver's term was expiring, and a share at least of the governor's social glory would flicker out with his office.

Molly Marley in the first breathing moment after the grand circle of introductions led Fern about the stately modern mansion with an air of proprietorship, for this was her second visit, and she displayed with glee the conservatory fountains, the marble swimming pool, the pipe organ, the outdoor sleeping rooms and the sunken gardens, all of which she had mentioned to Sledge the previous day. She had not known until afterward that she had had this very place in mind.

"It's a dream," declared Fern, with awed enthusiasm. "Wouldn't you like to own a wonderful place like this, Molly?"

"It isn't worth the moral price," judged Molly, looking about the beautiful grounds with a sigh of admiration, nevertheless. "It would be nice, though, after all," she finally admitted. "Mrs. Waver doesn't seem to enjoy it," wondered Fern. "She hides as much as possible, I think."

"She has never overcome her fear of using the wrong fork," guessed Molly. "That wasn't nice, Fern," she quickly added. "Mrs. Waver is a good, sweet woman, like my own mother, but I don't believe she is quite comfortable in all this magnificence. Governor Waver, on the other hand, likes it and consequently looks as if he belonged here."

"That's the trouble with most marriages," observed Fern from the depth of her twenty-one years of wisdom. "They're so unequal. It's perfectly ghastly. Molly, for either a man or a woman to marry beneath one's own capabilities of expansion."

"What does it say on the next page?" laughed Molly.

They were winding up out of the quaintly lighted sunken gardens, and they both stopped to admire the coldly severe beauty of the big white marble house as it lay gleaming in the moonlight.

"That there's no danger of that with you and Bert, you lucky girl," replied Fern, with a queer note in her voice, at which Molly wondered. "Bert's a dandy fellow. It makes me hopping mad on your account when anybody knocks him."

"Has the Lord Help the Absent Member club got at him, too?" asked Molly, with a smile. "I thought only women were eligible for discussion."

"They take anybody," dryly commented Fern. "But, after all, it is you who are up."

"Me?" gasped Molly. "Tell me the worst about myself."

"You've made a sensational hit," giggled Fern, "and that's enough to send you to the electrical chair any place. However, they're taking it out in pity."

"They must hate me, then," Molly felt assured at last of her success. "But why pity?"

"Bert," responded Fern. "He isn't here."

"He telephoned me this afternoon he might be late," said Molly, with a slightly worried air. "What of it?"

"Common malice, on view in the cloakroom, has it that he is at the present moment unrepresentable," stated

en Fern and waited. "It would be absurd if it were not so mean. I gave one cat a piece of my mind about it, the feather chinned woman with the purple condolence ribbons fastened on her cerise chiffon with brass furniture tacks."

Molly howled at the description. "Wow!" she gasped. "That's Mrs. Senator Allerton. What did you say to her?"

"That she seemed so happy to believe the worst and that—"

"I'll give you my little spangle fan for that as soon as we go home," promised Molly.

"You're almost as liberal as Sledge," complimented Fern. "I wouldn't give up that spangle fan for worlds. What do you suppose is keeping Bert, Molly?"

"He's probably 'slewed,' to use the Sledge dictionary," responded Molly calmly.

"Does that mean the same as jagged?"

"Spifflicated," elucidated Molly. "Don't look so shocked, Fern. Bert isn't in the habit of it. Any of the boys will tell you that he's so sober he breaks up most of their parties."

"Then why did he show off tonight?"

"I believe they call it drowning their sorrows," explained Molly quietly. "He lost everything today—money, business, prospects. Sledge broke him."

"Poor Bert," sympathized the warm-hearted Fern. "Why, that pretty faced old thief! Molly! He did it on your account! Isn't he clever! How on earth did he work it?"

"Had Bert tie up all his money, including some he borrowed, in property Sledge depreciated in value, then Sledge had the bank call the loan, Bert can't pay, and the bank seizes the property. Moreover, nobody will invest in Bert's enterprises since they know that Sledge is against him."

"I don't blame him for getting what does Sledge call it?"

"Slewed,"

"Do you?" asked Fern. "He'll probably feel sorry for it tomorrow," evaded Molly. "A man's conscience usually hurts him when he can't eat."

They had neared the house, and now a slender figure in black came rapidly toward them.

"Is that you, Molly?" inquired the anxious voice of Frank Marley.

"It is your fair daughter," she lightly assured him.

"They are missing you," he declared with all the responsibility of a successful showman. "The governor and his wife, Senator Allerton, the mayor and a dozen others have been inquiring about you. You are this year's prize beauty," and he laughed proudly.

Embarrassed by the display he apparently wished to make of her, Molly followed him into the maze of gorgeous drawing rooms, where the aristocracy of King county and the state displayed its evening clothes in constantly shifting array.

The mayor himself, a keen eyed young man with a preternaturally bald head and a reputation which followed him about like a black cat, came hurrying up to her with her dance program in his hand. With him was a gangling old dean with a professional lady killer smirk, whom he introduced by an unintelligible name and handed to Fern as a penance for all her misdeeds.

"They're already forming for the grand march," the mayor informed her as he led the way to the big ballroom with the magnificent pipe organ, which Molly had coveted for a year.

The line was half formed, and the parade was filling rapidly and with much laughing confusion as the mayor hurried with her down toward the center of the hall, where the governor already stood with his lady.

"Where is our place?" asked Molly, frowning rapidly. There was a state senator, a world famous sociologist, a musician of international reputation and three state representatives. The mayor probably would be about No. 8.

"Oh, I'm not your partner," he regretted. "I'm not so lucky. I don't even get to dance with you until No. 8. And, to Molly's breathless delight, he led her straight up to the eminent sociologist, who stood immediately behind the governor.

The eminent sociologist, who under that title had sounded so forbidding, proved to be a young looking man with a dancing eye, who hailed her with joy and unspokenly claimed attention solely on his merits as a "live member."

She found it difficult as he smiled so frankly and boyishly at her to remember that this was a man whose name was known throughout the civilized world for his keen thought upon political economy in its broadest sense, and the astounding part of it was that he was so good looking, graceful and self possessed and, most astounding of all, that he immediately began to talk to her about baseball.

The equally eminent musician, just behind him, claimed Professor Watt's attention for a moment, and Molly glanced complacently back along the line. Mrs. Allerton, the wife of the senator, was just behind her, looking hot daggers into her shoulder blades, and Molly, suppressing a giggle as she noted the purple condolence ribbons patted on with furniture tacks, gazed calmly through her at the other social Lucrèce Borgia, whom she had passed at one ruthless bound.

Also she cast her eyes downward, with much satisfaction, at her own extravagantly simple frock of pearl woven white chiffon. Only youth and a good figure could dare a frock like that, and, happy in her new enemies, Molly glanced at the dance program which had been made out for her.

She caught her breath with incredulous joy as she saw her allotment. Every notable in the gathering was on her card, beginning with the governor. No. 9 was Sledge, and she wondered, with dawning horror, what sort of figure he would be in the dance.

CHAPTER IV.

Molly's Spied Popularity.

TUESDAY sped the evening, with Molly climbing the dizzy heights of popularity in hourly increasing excitement. She not only

had a notable partner for every dance, but a brilliant partner for every tete-a-tete between numbers, and the almost equally happy, though not so highly favored, Fern warned her, in a giggling, whispered moment, to keep her back to the wall lest she be stabbed. Her cup of happiness was full when the famous musician, a near-sighted man who wore his hair short and inspected her rapturously through half inch thick glasses, composed a sparkling little rondo for her at a piano in a quiet little alcove and named it "Molly" and wrote it on her dance card, all in the space of seven minutes. True, he had danced with her two numbers before and had had time to think of her—possibly to think of her in rondo terms.

Occasionally she caught sight of Sledge in the throng, although she had not seen him on the floor, and she realized that her number with him would be a "sit out." Perhaps that was why it had been put down so far in the program, when she would welcome a rest. It was like his doing, for she had to acknowledge that he was at least farsighted.

One thing perplexed her. He was much less awkward and much more at ease here than he had been at her party. Whenever she saw him he was talking gravely with men of large affairs, and, to her surprise, she observed that, in every case, he was accorded notable respect. Even the musician seemed absordedly interested in him, and her leading millionaire came back to him again and again. She wondered why men sought him, and she was still wondering when the eminent sociologist fairly snatched her out of the arms of the mayor after the eighth dance.

"Come and watch me smoke a cigarette," he begged her. "I've been trying to get a chance to talk with you again the entire evening, but there's always such an increasingly mad scramble around you that the attempts made me feel undignified."

"You'd worry a lot about that," she guessed.

"Wouldn't I?" he laughed. "Will you chill if we step out on the terrace?"

"I don't know how," she happily told him, and they hurried outside, where he led her to a seat in the moonlight and deftly made her comfortable with three cushions from his many chairs.

Sledge and Senator Allerton passed them as he lighted his cigarette, and he looked after Sledge until the match burned his fingers.

"There is the biggest man I have seen in a long while," he remarked as he sat beside her on the settee.

"They say he is not only the boss of the city, but of the state," replied Molly, very much interested. "You knew that, didn't you?"

"Of course," he acknowledged, "but I scarcely think that would influence my judgment. I have studied a great deal more of more power and influence than he has at present, but none of them, so far as I can recollect, seemed to have his elemental force. Whoever he was born, he would have been a leader. He is a wonderful man. Throw him in a savage country and he would be king."

A huge figure approached them. "Hello, Watt," rumbled the deep voice of Sledge. "My dance, Molly."

"Well, you having a good time?" asked Sledge, sitting comfortably in the seat Mr. Watt had just vacated.

"The time of my life," she assured him, with happy animation.

"That's the word," he heartily approved. "If there's anybody here you want just tell Cameron. If he don't trot 'em right over tell me."

"The mayor has been very kind," acknowledged Molly, beginning to wonder.

"He's got his orders," returned Sledge complacently. "Let me see your dance program," and he took it from her lap. "I thought so," he commented. "There's a dark horse turned up, and you didn't get him."

"A ringer," he explained. "Lord Bunchase, Andrew Lepton, the big coffee monopolist, sneaked him in here under an alias, and nobody's on." He puzzled over the card a moment. "Excuse me till I fix it," and he stalked away.

Molly sat silently, allowing a cold wave of humiliation slowly to chill her soul. Why, Sledge had carefully prearranged her triumph of the evening. He had assumed control of her dance card and of her succession of delightful tete-a-tetes. He had driven the star performers into her net as if they had been droves of sheep. True, men had sought her a second time of their own accord because of that charm which she knew she possessed—a vaguely understood attractiveness, which was more than beauty, more than cleverness, more than mere sex receptiveness. She had won by her own power, but Sledge had given her the glorious opportunities. His omnipotence began to annoy her and his ruthlessness to inflame her already inflamed resentment.

She knew precisely what was happening at this moment. He was creating havoc in not less than half a dozen dance cards, with no compunction about having discommoded or distressed any one. Then there was Bert downtown battling with a disaster which had thrown him completely from his feet. Poor Bert! She had by no means forgotten him, even amid the height of her excitement. She should have been there to comfort him, and yet—well, he had not seen fit to come to her for comfort. Men were queer creatures. A woman when disaster overtook her did not need to cadden her intelligence. She needed it then more than ever.

After all, though, Bert was a man, and that was the way of men, and there was no use to dream of overturning the entire accepted order of creation. She was certain, however, that she could be of more help to Bert after they were married. He was weaker than she had thought.

Very well; Sledge had thrown down the gauntlet of battle. He had laughed when he was threatened and had rushed Bert in challenging defiance. Let him now take the consequences. If he

went to the penitentiary, well and good. He had probably sent other people there, with no more qualms of mercy than she would now show to him. She could be as ruthless as he. What was it Professor Watt had called the quality? Elemental force—that was it. Well, she possessed it too. She felt it within her, stirring with the same physical nascency as the virility of parenthood, to which it was so closely allied.

Just off the governor's stuffed leather library was a small room, with a hard desk and six hard chairs, and a hard looking letter file, and a hard, fire-proof safe set into the wall, and here, while Lord Bunchase led Molly Marley through the paces of a hard two-step, Governor Waver and Senator Allerton and Sledge and Frank Marley gathered for a few moments of comfortable chat such as elderly gentlemen love to indulge in while frivolous younger people dance the flying hours away. All four being gentlemen who, by the consent of the public, bore the grave responsibility of the public welfare on their shoulders, it was not strange that their chat should turn to public affairs.

"I am glad to be identified with the enterprise," avowed State Senator Allerton, who was a suave, clean faced gentleman, with a good forehead and a quite negotiable tongue. "At the same time, as far as I am privately concerned, I can only regard it as a temporary investment."

"Why temporary?" demanded Frank Marley, who was feeling particularly capable this evening. His \$175,000 worth of street railway stock had been increased to \$225,000. He was to have \$87,500 cash out of the undivided surplus of the old company, and his daughter, Molly, was the most popular girl at the governor's ball. "The street railway company has always made money, and the city needs additional transportation facilities. We have reached the normal period of extension, and I do not see what is to prevent us from limitless prosperity."

"The franchises," Senator Allerton reminded him. "Your present permits have less than five years to run."

"I have never had any trouble in having them renewed," objected Marley, priding himself on his management.

"Times are changing," sighed Allerton. "There is a growing disposition on the part of the public to charge public service corporations for the use of public property."

"The people are ungrateful," mourned Governor Waver, who had enriched himself through furnishing electric light at his own price to a public which had known nothing better than gas.

"The moment they see a profit on their luxuries they want part of it. An undivided surplus such as the street car company has had is a constant menace."

"That was a sinking fund for extensions and improvements," Marley reminded him. "The stockholders had no right to ask for a division of it."

"They would if we had not put it out of harm's road," insisted the governor. "That much has been saved to the men who really earned it, but I should not like to see a similar profit exposed. To my mind, a 7 per cent dividend is an even worse folly."

"It gives confidence in the stock," argued Marley. "The public would never be so eager to take up this new issue if it had not been for that 7 per cent dividend."

"That's what it was for," interpolated Sledge, looking out of the window into the sunken garden and vainly hunting the hand hole in the gate.

"It has served its purpose," granted Allerton. "But taxpayers are becoming greedy. When they see the stockholders of a public corporation making 7 per cent they want some of it and try to make the corporations pay part of their taxes. In every city of importance the voters are demanding pay for street car franchises and making the street railway companies, in addition, bear half the cost of all street improvements."

"It's a bad outlook," agreed Governor Waver. "Frankly, as soon as I receive my new issue of stock I shall have it quietly placed on sale."

Marley looked at him indignantly. "Why, the street railway company is entering on the greatest period of prosperity in its career," he asserted. "There'll be no trouble about franchises. The city is wild to have the improvements and must have them."

Allerton looked at him wonderingly. "Waver is right," he stated. "I shall sell my own stock, and I'll venture to say that Sledge has already made silent arrangements for disposing of his. Do you know that the franchises at present granted in this state are revocable and that it is not possible to secure one which is positively safe for longer than ten year periods? When you come to the renewal of your franchises, Marley, you will be met with a demand for pay and will have other restrictions imposed on you. Our present franchise law, in view of the public tendency, is a bad one for investors."

"Let's fix it," suggested Sledge.

"I'm afraid it's too late," protested Allerton.

"Not for a new gag," dissented Sledge. "A new one can be put over quick."

"I fancy that there should be protection somewhere," opined the governor. "No matter what changes in public sentiment, the investing class, upon which the public depends for prosperity, must always be protected."

"But how?" inquired the senator. "How in this particular case?"

"Head 'em off," granted Sledge. "I'm keeping my stock."

"I'd be glad to hold mine," stated the senator. "But how is it to be made of future value?"

"That's up to you," Sledge replied, rising. "Figure it out and see me tomorrow, Marley. I want to talk to you."

Mr. Marley, today a man worth over a third of a million dollars in the street railway stock alone, arose in offended dignity. He was a trifle too important, too capable and too wealthy to be ordered about like a messenger boy by a man who might shortly be a convicted criminal. Molly had arranged

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an interview between her father and Bert on the previous afternoon, and Mr. Marley also now knew a thing or two.

"I would suggest tomorrow," he stated coldly. "I should much prefer to talk with you during business hours."

"This ain't business," said Sledge, leading the way into the library, where he took a seat in an alcove.

Marley followed him reluctantly. "If it is my family affairs"—he began in protest.

"Sit down," directed Sledge. "Bert glider has been making threats against me."

"Has he?" inquired Marley noncommittally.

"Tell him to quit or make good," ordered Sledge.

"Really, Mr. Sledge, I don't see where I can interfere," rejoined Mr. Marley. "The matter is entirely between you and Bert."

"He's a friend of yours," charged Sledge.

"Yes," acknowledged Marley, feeling that he could afford to acknowledge it now that the street car reorganization had gone beyond the point where Sledge could stop it.

"How about this marriage with Molly?"

"That's Molly's affair," stated Marley stiffly.

"You know he's broke, don't you?" "I heard something of the sort," admitted Marley. "He's a clever young man, however, and until he gets on his feet again I have money enough for both."

"You won't stop it, then?"

"Certainly not," declared Marley, feeling that he might just as well make capital for courage out of the fact that he could not in the slightest degree influence Molly. "I might, perhaps, prefer a more brilliant match for Molly, but I do not need to make it a matter of money, and there is no better family in America than Bert's. The Mary and Glider are the oldest and best stock in this country, moreover, above all things, I wish to see my daughter happy."

"So do I," asserted Sledge. "That's why she can't marry this pinhead. I want her myself."

"Molly has made her choice," declared her father firmly.

"So you lay down, eh?"

"I decline to interfere."

"Making Bert a bum cuts no ice?"

"His temporary financial condition has no bearing in the matter. I should

feel humiliated to think that I had allowed that trifling consideration to be a factor."

"Hub!" granted Sledge. "You get enough for both, eh?"

"Quite enough," and Marley reflected, with a pleasant feeling of superiority, upon the moment soon to come when this political and commercial bully would be cowering.

"Then watch out for your eye," warned Sledge and, rising, walked out into the drawing rooms.

He found Molly quite busy, but, since she was only occupied with a state representative and a local millionaire and the mayor and the young champion of the tennis players' club, he bowed her.

She was astounded to see how he melted before him and almost had a feeling of wildly clutching at the coat tails of the mayor, whom she heartily disliked.

"I'm sorry for you, Molly," Sledge told her as he pre-empted the piano alcove. "I got to hand you another job."

"You're a fast worker," she complimented him. "But you'll have to work faster. I just gave Willie Walters a hint of the splendid news we are to have for the Blade, and he is tickled to death."

"Good work!" applauded Sledge. "I want that galled quick."

Molly smiled. "All right. Go as far as you like," she confidently invited him. "We'll see who gets the worst of it. By the way, maybe you wouldn't mind telling me the new job I am to receive."

Sledge chuckled. "Your dad says he don't care if Bert is a bum."

"He isn't!" she hotly denied. "Your dad's a game sport. He says he has enough money for both."

"Good for daddy," she cried, delighted.

"Sure," granted Sledge. "I'm gonna break him too."

(Continued next Saturday.)

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